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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: CONCERNING POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN
WESTERN OROMIYA

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During an October 17-20 trip to Western Oromiya by Ethiopia Desk Officer John Wysham, Deputy Political-Economic Chief and Political Specialist, GoE/Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) interlocutors said there were no political tensions in their region and, while acknowledging that opposition offices remain closed, said they expect opposition parties to participate in upcoming local elections. Separately, opposition members from the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) and Oromo National Congress (ONC) said the GoE/OPDO is, through frequent beatings, jailings and other coercive tactics, harassing and intimidating opposition members and sympathizers in Western Oromiya. OFDM and ONC officials said that if the GoE/OPDO's current tactics continue, they do not know how, or if, they will participate in the local elections. While Post will certainly urge all parties to participate actively in the elections, it will be difficult to convince the opposition to do so if the impediments imposed by the government and ruling party cadres persist or increase. Ambassador Yamamoto will meet soon with other donor Ambassadors to discuss a common approach to the Ethiopian government to exert greater accountability over local officials who might be impeding democratic processes. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) From October 17-20, Ethiopia Desk Officer John Wysham, Deputy Political-Economic Chief and Political Specialist (collectively, EmbOffs) traveled in Western Oromiya to assess political conditions in advance of the upcoming local elections. EmbOffs met with GoE/ OPDO zone administrators and party officials in Gimbi (West Wellega Zone) and Dembi Dolo (Kellem-Wellega Zone), as well as proxies for the zone administrators in Nekemt (East Wellega Zone) and Ambo (West Shoa Zone). In Gimbi, EmbOffs met opposition OFDM party officials and OFDM regional parliament MPs. In Dembi Dolo, Presbyterian church officials provided insight into the challenges facing their zone. In Ambo and Nekemt, EmbOffs spoke with opposition Oromo National Congress (ONC) party officials and ONC regional MPs.

OPDO: We Are All For Democracy

¶3. (C) In Gimbi, Dembi Dolo, Nekemt and Ambo, GoE/OPDO zone administrators, OPDO party officials and their proxies generally said that their zones had no political tensions, but confirmed to EmbOffs that no opposition offices are currently open. OPDO officials largely attributed the absence of opposition offices to the fact that the campaign season for local elections has not begun, or explained that the opposition simply had not reopened offices that were closed in the wake of violence associated with the 2005 parliamentary elections. In Gimbi and Dembi Dolo, GoE/OPDO officials said they expect the National Electoral Board (NEB)

will soon finalize the schedule for local elections, paving the way for a peaceful campaign, in which opposition parties will participate. ODPO officials expect a "nice turnout" of voters. West Wollega Zone administrator Tekle Deressa explained that OPDO is "all for democracy" and opposition parties will encounter "no problems" campaigning provided they follow proper rules and regulations and produce a letter from the NEB that shows they are legitimate parties and permitted to campaign in the zone. Tekle demurred when queried whether OPDO, whose offices are open currently throughout the zone, itself possesses such a letter. By way of explaining the dearth of opposition political activity at present, Tekle added that the West Wollega Zone constituents are "totally focused" on socio-economic development projects and the impending harvest. Both Tekle and Tamirat Kibebew, Kellem-Wellega Zone administrator, insisted that there are no political prisoners in their respective zones. In Ambo and Nekemt, proxies for the zone administrators did not appear to have the authority to engage EmbOffs substantively and limited the meetings to courtesy calls.

Opposition: Democracy In Name Only

14. (C) In contrast, OFDM and ONC opposition members in Western Oromiya uniformly said that the GoE/OPDO, rather than create democratic space, makes every effort to intimidate and stifle political opposition and erode support for opposition parties. Both OFDM and ONC members told EmbOffs that GoE/OPDO authorities subscribe to "democracy in name only." In Dembi Dolo, an OFDM opposition interlocutor regretted by phone that he could not meet with EmbOffs for fear of government retaliation. Interlocutors affiliated with the Presbyterian church said Dembi Dolo is under de facto "one-party rule." In Gimbi, two of three OFDM opposition

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members were detained by police the day they were scheduled to meet EmbOffs (both were released without charges by nightfall, and one managed to meet with EmbOffs afterward, describing his detention as police harassment). In Nekemt and Ambo, ONC opposition members said that their contacts with EmbOffs were being closely monitored and they feared retaliation at some point.

15. (C) Western Oromiya opposition allegations against the GoE/OPDO include: (i) the routine detention or jailing of opposition members and sympathizers without charges, for periods that range between a day and several months; (ii) the surveillance and beatings of the opposition by GoE/OPDO authorities or OPDO cadres; (iii) the use of electric prods against jailed or detained opposition members by GoE/OPDO authorities; (iv) the ransacking of opposition offices by OPDO cadres, with all materials confiscated; (v) pressure applied to landlords by OPDO cadres to prevent the reopening of shuttered opposition offices; and (vi) the use by OPDO of crude, coercive tactics -- such as denying educational opportunities to students that do not overtly pledge their support for OPDO -- to bolster OPDO support at the expense of the opposition. In Nekemt, ONC officials said that in some cases GoE security services and/or OPDO cadres have killed opposition members or sympathizers. The Nekemt ONC officials cited a February 2007 incident in Horo-Guduru where, they said, a family of fifteen disappeared after being stripped and beaten by state security. The same ONC officials allege that state security services frequently bind the testicles of young Oromos who refuse to pledge allegiance to OPDO in order, supposedly, to prevent them from having children. On August 8, 2007, ONC Nekemt interlocutors alleged, an ONC member named Geremew Teresa was jailed by state security and beaten so severely that he died from his injuries a day later. In Ambo, three of four ONC interlocutors told EmbOffs that they had been detained without charges, some multiple times, for varying periods over the past two years for alleged incidents not/not connected with the 2005

parliamentary elections. "The jail is our home," one said.

Uncertainty About Participation in Local Elections

¶16. (C) As a result of alleged GoE/OPDO harassment and intimidation, Western Oromiya opposition interlocutors said that they do not know if, or how, they will be able to participate in upcoming local elections. In Gimbi, an OFDM member told EmbOffs "We are afraid. We can be arrested or killed if we talk to our constituents. The government is not ready to give any power to the opposition." The OFDM member noted confidently, however, that OFDM still enjoys widespread support and concluded "We will win if we have even a month to prepare." Another OFDM interlocutor said that the OPDO is spreading cash in villages to win support, but averred "the people know to who to vote for." In Ambo, ONC members told EmbOffs "The situation is deteriorating very fast. We have no freedom to associate, organize or express ourselves. We have no access to the press. Conditions have nose-dived since the 2005 parliamentary elections. Basically, the ruling party does not want to see an opposition." In Ambo, ONC members say ONC will only participate in local elections if: (i) "people's rights are respected"; (ii) ONC is given access to the media; (iii) ONC is permitted to assemble peacefully; (iv) the NEB is neutral; and (v) ONC offices are permitted to reopen. At present, ONC interlocutors said, none of these conditions have been met.

Christian-Muslim Tensions

¶17. (C) In Dembi Dolo, Presbyterian church officials expressed concern that the GoE/OPDO obsesses about tamping down Oromo opposition political activities but ignores a growing threat of Islamic extremism. The church officials said that five years ago, in response to a drought, the GoE resettled approximately 100,000 predominantly Muslim Oromos from Eastern Oromiya into predominantly Christian Western Oromiya. Church officials said that well-funded Imams at certain mosques have begun espousing extremist views, even calling for Shari'a law and distributing flyers that say Oromos should not be Christian, adding that in October, 2006, Muslim extremists burned several churches, raped two Christian girls and mutilated a Christian evangelist. The GoE/OPDO responded simply with several arrests and platitudes about the need for religious tolerance, the church officials said, lamenting that the GoE/OPDO is willing to tolerate a degree of extremism in order to divide Oromos. Opposition interlocutors in Nekemt and Ambo said that their areas did not have religious tensions but were quick to say the government would not be above exploiting religious

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differences for its own purposes.

Comment

¶18. (C) With local elections likely to occur in early March 2008, the on-going harassment and impediments to opposition party activity risks leading major parties to boycott the election. While Post will certainly urge all parties to participate actively in the elections, it will be difficult to convince the opposition to do so if the impediments imposed by the government and ruling party cadres persist or increase. Ambassador Yamamoto will meet soon with other donor Ambassadors to discuss a common approach to the Ethiopian government to exert greater accountability over local officials who are impeding democratic processes. While a holistic assessment of the coming local elections will be difficult in light of the Ethiopian government's decision not to permit international observers and the new National Electoral Board's slow progress in presenting procedures and requirements for voter education or local observation activities, Post has begun a series of trips to the various

regions to assess the current playing field and is working with other donors to get GoE buy-in for, and to implement, an "electoral playing field" assessment to serve as a metric for progress as the campaign period sets in and local elections approach. END COMMENT.
YAMAMOTO